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ABSTRACT

The Clinton County (New York) Community Development Center (CDC) system was examined to determine its appropriateness for Cooperative Extension Services. Nine active CDC's were investigated via personal interviews and report review to assess CDC scope, activities, audiences, successes, failures, local government support, and potentials. Emphasizing the necessity for a systematic flow of information, findings indicated that successful CDC's should make provisions for: (1) definitive goals and objectives; (2) evaluation of objectives; (3) the director's role, employment guidelines, and pre-job and on-job training; (4) decisions about CDC policy making and implementation; (5) CDC location and facility availability; and (6) CDC relationship and coordination with other centers, community organizatns, and extra-community agencies. It was concluded that Cooperative Extension could provide CDC with support and leadership via: (1) record keeping, reporting to town officials, and publicity; (2) educational provisions for middle class families in addition to established low income educational provisions; (3) educational provisions for CDC directors (a 16 week course on decision making, supervision, etc.); (4) provision for systematic performance evaluation; and (5) assistance in extended involvement of community volunteers to facilitate CDC communications. (JC)

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One Approach to Rural Outreach: Community Development Centers in Clinton County, New York, and their Implications for Cooperative Extension

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Introduction

The Extension Service was established as a vehicle by which practical information could be transferred from the land grant college and the Department of Agriculture to the people in their local environment. The original legislation did not limit the focus of the service, but defined its clientele as "the people of the United States." Representative Lever, in his 1913 report to the House of Representatives, wrote that the extension agent "is to assume leadership in every movement, whatever it may be, the aim of which is better farming, better living, more happiness, more education, and better citizenship."[1]

While the overall objective of Extension could still be stated in these terms today, specific programs and strategies have been continuously developing and changing as American agriculture and American society have changed. The redefinition of programs and emphasis has gone too slow for some observers. For example, James Hightower notes what he considers serious discrepancies between the initial goals of Cooperative Extension and what it is actually doing. He cites 1970-71 New York State statistics which show nine percent of professional time spent with low income people and a "mere" one percent of all time spent "improving farm incomes" directed toward the low income group.[2]

However, outside commentators are not unique in calling for a critical evaluation of existing programs and proposing new approaches.

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[1] USDA-NASULGC, Extension Study Committee. "A People and A Spirit" (Fort Collins, Colorado: Colorado State University, November, 1968), p. 18.

[2] Jim Hightower, Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times, (Cambridge Schenkman Publishing Company, 1972), p. 125.

"Perspectives for the '70's," a New York State Extension think-piece, calls for "a re-examining of the balance between present Extension efforts and innovative approaches."[3] The report continues:

> Cooperative Extension has a responsibility for continued leadership in informal educational programs. This role requires the development and testing of new educational methods, despite a high degree of risk. As such it can profit from success and learn from failure.[4]

As this discussion suggests, the establishment of objectives and priorities must not only include a consideration of target audiences but also of programs. In this paper we will describe what we believe to be a relatively unique system of community centers which are currently delivering a variety of services and educational programs to rural areas in one upstate New York county. The centers as presently operating are reaching a wide range of groups especially low income, and represent an innovative approach to program delivery. Although the centers are not sponsored by Cooperative Extension, there is a close working relationship in Clinton County. The second section of the paper will elaborate some critical issues in the operation of these centers. In the final section we will discuss the appropriateness of such a system for Cooperative Extension.

Community Development Centers - Historical Outlines

Clinton County, located in the extreme northeast corner of New York State, was selected as the site for the pilot program supported by Title V of the Rural Development Act of 1972. The county is predominantly rural with over 43,000 of the 73,000 residents living outside of Plattsubrgh,

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[3] David W. Dik and James E. Lawrence. "Perspectives for the '70's," (Ithaca: Cooperative Extension - New York State, 1971). p. 2.

[4] Ibid., p. 9.

the only urban area. The county steering committee for the program identified the delivery of services to county residents as a major focus for action and research along with two closely related areas of housing and employment. The committee, made up of local leaders, citizens from various population segments, and extension and research personnel, also noted that a special feature of the service network in Clinton County is the existence of a number of so-called Community Development Centers throughout the county which serve as mechanisms for getting services to people.

The centers were originally called Care Centers. They were established in Clinton and other northern New York counties at the town (township) level in 1966 with Office of Economic Opportunity funds with the aim of serving an information and referral function in rural areas for existing agencies. While not all counties in New York State ever had any centers, 14 of the 15 minor civil divisions in Clinton County had functioning centers at one time or another. The intriguing fact, however, is that even after federal OEO monies were being phased out, each of the nine Clinton County Centers then in operation continued to function under town government funding. To our knowledge, no other rural outreach centers now exist in New York State. If by no other criterion than their continued existence, the centers have been a success.

The centers have been and still are located in a wide variety of places ranging from town halls and firehouses to church basements. The staff typically has consisted of one paraprofessional, "center director," in each center with a county supervisor or coordinator operating from the OEO office in Plattsburgh.[5] These paraprofessionals have been local

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[5]The local OEO office is called the Joint Council for Economic Opportunity of Plattsburgh and Clinton County or simply JCEO.

citizens and with few exceptions have been women from hardship backgrounds. In a number of instances these persons have emerged as local leaders in their own right.

In addition to the local center directors and county personnel including the coordinator JCEO staff and county advisory committee, the formal structure includes for each center a Policy Advisory Committee (PAC). The membership in the PAC is based on the general OEO model of representatives for various community sectors including government, voluntary organizations, and client groups.

Until early 1974 the majority of the financial support for the centers came from OEO with local towns providing some in-kind support such as office space and travel. As suggested above, all nine of the centers in operation in 1974 had their funding picked up by town governments. As of August, 1975, seven centers are operating with the majority of their support from the immediate local government. Federal monies are still making up the remainder of the centers' budgets.

Critical Issues in Center Organization and Operation

At the request of the Clinton County Rural Development Program Steering Committee the authors prepared a report addressing among other issues the scope of center activities and audiences, the reasons for the various centers' failures and successes including the ability to secure local government support, and the potential for new programs. Our strategy for researching these problems included examining the voluminous minutes of the various boards and advisory committees, summarizing monthly reports for the period of operation of each center, and interviewing over 30 local officials, agency personnel, and past and present CDC directors.

The report itself is too lengthy to review here, but perhaps it will be useful to consider briefly the report's conclusions which were presented to the county and communities as an "Agenda for Decision Making."[6] Rather than make specific program or policy recommendations we suggested a series of interrelated issues or questions that the people in each town would have to consciously consider in making center-related decisions. These included the following:

1) What are the goals and objectives of the center? Who is the target audience? Are these goals realistic in light of resource constraints?

2) What provisions are made to evaluate the success in attaining goals and objectives?

3) What is the role of the center director and any other center personnel? What employment guidelines should be used? What pre-job and on-job training should be provided or required?

4) Who will make decisions about center policy? How will the control necessary in implementing the policy be exercised?

5) Where should the center be located? What facilities should be available in the center?

6) How does the center fit into the structure of other local community groups and organizations? How is the center linked to and coordinated with other centers in the county and with other extra-community agencies?[7]

We are of the opinion that there are no "correct" answers to any of these questions. We found that failure came from neglecting to consider them systematically since they are all intimately related.

In addition to the above questions, there was one other issue which assumes an over-riding importance and which serves as the essential link among the six. Adequate provision must be made for information to flow systematically among all parties who are in any way connected with the

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[6] Dan E. Moore, Jane S. Gore and Mary Pasti, "One Approach to Rural Outreach: Community Development Centers, Clinton County, New York." (Ithaca: Department of Rural Sociology, Cornell University, 1974).

[7] Ibid., p. 54-55.

centers. There were numerous examples of needless conflicts which arose simply because individuals or groups were unaware of the decisions or opinions of others. While the persons interviewed for our study often cited the personalities or abilities of particular individuals as responsible for either successes or failures, we observed that much of the "credit" could be attributed to the context in which decisions were made, more specifically the degree to which the above questions were systematically answered and communications channels were open and utilized.

In order to illustrate the range of options available to the various towns as well as to suggest the roles the centers have played, we will elaborate on the first question relating to center goals and objectives. The various functions the centers have performed in their nine years of existence can be classified under five headings: 1) information center, 2) outreach center, 3) care center, 4) neighborhood center, and 5) community development center. While some of these titles correspond to official center designations, the names are used to imply the general and potential scope of center activities. Each center has performed a combination of some or all of these functions in the past.

The centers have served as <u>information centers</u> for the community, as a place for people to come or a place to call with a question or a problem. Available information has included brochures, agency listings, activities' calendars, and application forms of various sorts. A wider range of additional information could include such things as lists of available housing or housing rehabilitation information, and lists of jobs available. The crucial factor here is that the community residents know that they can use the center in this manner. This function could easily be provided for all population segments, not just low income groups as has been the case in the past.

In some respects the centers have served as outreach centers, or local extensions of the county social services agencies. With the centralization of services and personnel in the City of Plattsburgh, this supplemental outreach could profitably be expanded. The center can be a referral center, and thus liaison between the people of the town and the agencies and/or a field office for one or more of the social service agencies. The key differences between this and the information function mentioned above is follow-through. Such activities have been most successful from all points of view when the director does not merely hand out information, but also takes steps to ensure that the information is acted upon. This entails routine checking with both agency personnel and center clientele.

The centers were at one time actually called care centers. In this respect they were a source of direct and emergency help. The center personnel have distributed clothing, money, food, fuel, equipment, and have given people emergency transportation. Informal counseling, welcoming newcomers to the community, organizing meetings and clubs, delivering nutritious meals, running toy drives, delivering Christmas baskets, teaching driving, writing personal recommendations, assisting with tax forms, babysitting, mending clothes are all forms of direct help which directors have at one time or another provided.

The provision of all manner of direct aid has been disfunctional, however, when carried to the extreme. A director's time is limited, and whether time is best spent babysitting or mending or typing is clearly open to question. This issue reinforces the necessity of carefully setting center priorities so that the director and others will have some basis for choosing among a number of possible activities.

These centers have served as the locus for community classes and activities, a kind of activity which implies a slightly different set of objectives. In taking this kind of neighborhood center approach the directors have shown much imagination in structuring do-it-yourself classes, hobby and informational classes, and general social events.

Finally, the centers have pursued in a limited way goals which suggest they may be literally characterized as community development centers. The OEO injunction to "help people help themselves" has been more broadly interpreted in these instances to mean helping townspeople as a whole work out a plan for general community improvement. Clearly the entire community is ultimately benefited when individuals and families are served. Individuals and families, however, are also helped when such community projects as starting a local business, organizing a cooperative, starting a park or establishing a credit union are undertaken. The dominant center philosophy has been to provide one-to-one aid, and this approach has much to recommend it. But to limit the center to such activities is to miss a wide range of possibilities. Community development projects as such tend to be more permanent and to benefit more people over a longer period of time.

This discussion of center functions suggests the range of activities actually going on and the potential difficulties in choosing among alternatives. Needless to say, the choice of activities has implications for the other questions outlined above. And in every town limited resources makes choice necessary. For example, what should be the role of the center director, what are the job qualifications and what types of in-service training are necessary?

We should note again the crucial role of information flow. For example, we found in a number of towns where centers had ceased to exist

that the town supervisor's (chief elected official) characterization of what he thought the center was doing was radically different than what the former director said she was attempting to accomplish. The necessity for the kind of continuous communication we recommend is at once more necessary and more possible since most decisions and activities occur at the local town level.

Implications for Cooperative Extension

Are the Community Development Centers as organized in Clinton County a viable mechanism for delivering old and new programs by Cooperative Extension? We think this question can be answered in the affirmative. At least there are aspects of the system which deserve close examination. Probably most important is the community focus represented by the centers. This speaks to the issue raised at the beginning of this paper -- who should be the audience for extension programs? Extension has traditionally served production agriculture as its primary client. And in many communities this is still an appropriate focus. The centers in Clinton County have until recently served a low-income audience. But the centers are changing to include a community-wide orientation. The PAC, or local advisory committee, can mold the thrust of the local program to fit local conditions. Extension has also worked closely with local, usually county, advisory committees, but in some instances past practices of dealing with a specialized audience has gotten built into the advisory group. And since the people setting policy are the people getting served, the process has become a closed, if not a vicious, circle. In this case Extension could well benefit by having sub-advisory groups on a less than county-wide basis and thus insure that all segments of the community are represented.

The idea of having an actual center, a room or set of rooms, in local communities has much to recommend it. Not only would it help to make Extension more visible and its programs more accessible, it also facilitates program planning and closer working relationships with other community groups.

We do not mean to imply that such a set of centers should be the exclusive domain of extension. On the contrary, in many communities, such as Clinton County, extension can be most useful in supporting the existing network via a variety of programs. But in other cases it may be necessary for extension to more clearly organize and operate the centers. To reiterate, the Community Development Centers in Clinton County have been officially run by JCEO. Cooperative Extension has not been involved in the day-to-day operation of the centers. However, it has been one of the county agencies active in utilizing the centers as mechanisms for delivering programs. For the most part this has meant using center facilities as a place to hold meetings.

The Clinton County practice of having paraprofessionals carry out the day-to-day activities has been extremely successful. And in some ways the approach is similar to the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program which has been successful in Cooperative Extension. The paraprofessionals in Clinton County are not the customary middle-class, volunteer leaders extension has worked with in the past, but rather local citizens, often from hardship backgrounds. Recent research findings from studies dealing with paraprofessionals imply that for every ten paraprofessionals assigned to a specific task, one professioal is needed for supervisory and on-going in-service training functions. It might be appropriate for the local Extension Association to employ an agent whose sole responsibility is the supervision of paraprofessional outreach personnel.

With extension at the county level providing the professional supervision through whatever current funding channels, it seems appropriate that a more primary unit of government support the paraprofessionals. Certainly such an arrangement raises issues of policy-making and control. But a variety of accommodations have been worked out between state and county governments for this operation of Cooperative Extension. And we are confident appropriate patterns can emerge between county and local governing bodies.

To illustrate this rather general discussion with more specific examples, let us conclude by sketching the activities in Clinton County today.

Despite the existence of the Community Development Centers and what is considered an excellent extension program, there is an almost desperate need for services in rural areas. This is evidenced not only by the designation of rural service delivery as a priority item by the Clinton County Rural Development Program Steering Committee, but also by preliminary finding from an indepth study funded by the Rural Development Program.[8]

The Clinton County Rural Development Program is attempting to serve as a catalyst for more effective service delivery from existing agencies including the centers, Cooperative Extension, and other agencies. One of the main efforts in this regard is providing the services of one professional person to work full-time with the county JCEO center coordinator (a paraprofessional) and the center directors to enhance their effectiveness. Current efforts are focused on the following problem areas:

1) In order to better inform local taxpayers about the Centers with the hope of insuring future local funding, the directors are being assisted with: systematic record keeping, thorough and regular

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[8]Peter H. Gore, "Cross-Roads Survey of Clinton County, New York," (Chazy, N.Y.: Clinton County Rural Development Program, Miner Center, 1975).

reporting to town government officials, and improved publicity techniques.

2) To combat the criticism that the Centers serve only "welfare" clients, more educational programs and activities for middle class families are being planned as well as the usual programs and services for the low income.

3) A sixteen-week series of classes about decision-making, problem solving, supervision, management, and communications were recently conducted at the local community college for the directors to improve their personal skills for working with human problems.

4) Regular performance evaluations are being carried out with the directors to point out personal strengths and weaknesses.

5) The directors are being assisted with involving more community volunteers, i.e., clergy and local service groups, to expand program offerings and to increase community communications about the Centers.

These are a few specific examples of the kind of support and leadership that we believe Cooperative Extension can provide in the operation of some form of community development center.

The Clinton County Rural Development Program is evaluating its efforts in working closely with town and county governments and agencies in the delivery of services, aid, and educational programs for youth and adults in this isolated rural region of upstate New York. If this evaluation supports our expectations, we will be even more enthusiastic about the Community Development Center concept as an effective, low cost, model for human service delivery in other parts of New York State and the nation.

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